

From Fiber To Fabric, Circa 1840

Trudy Thompson

As clothing is one of man's basic needs, its production played an important part with the early settlers. Because it was a necessary item which had to be replaced as it wore out, clothing occupied much of the early homemaker's time.

Wool and cotton were used in the making of the cloth. When the early settlers brought their livestock with them, you can be sure there were sheep in the group of animals. Seeds for planting cotton may have been brought with them or bought from the traveling peddlers. Silk was not used extensively in the South and the raising of flax requires a colder climate so these two fibers, silk and flax, were not a factor in the Jackson Purchase area.

If the wife had to choose between her spinning wheel and her loom as to which she could bring to her new home, the choice was the spinning wheel. First, it was easier to make a loom than a spinning wheel. Secondly, the spun yarn could be used for knitting in addition to weaving, whereas without a wheel, the loom was of little value. Also by the eighteen thirties itinerant weavers were traveling throughout the Eastern United States and setting up their looms wherever there was the need. Women would spin yarn all year and when the weaver arrived, he would weave the fabric they needed.

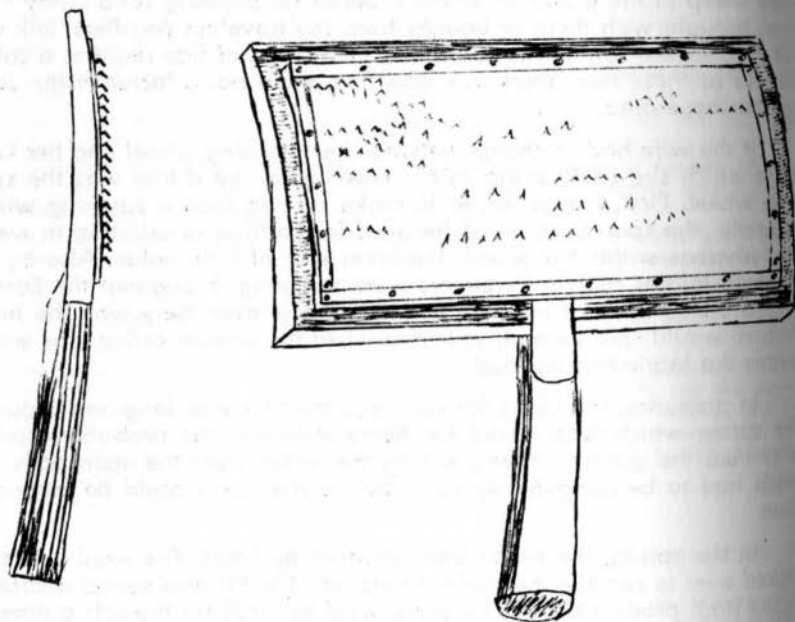
In preparing the fibers for spinning, the task was long and arduous. The cotton which was raised for home clothing was probably planted in or near the garden. After plucking the cotton from the open bolls, the seeds had to be removed by hand before the fibers could be carded or spun.

In the spring, the sheep were sheared by hand. The wool was then picked over to remove the sticks, briars, etc. Next it was sorted according to the final product desired — some wool selected for the soft garments, and other set aside for blankets and coats. If the fiber was to be dyed before spinning, the wool was washed to remove the grease or lanolin. Dyeing at this step in the process will give a more intense, even dye and is the origin of the expression "dyed in the wool".

The carding of the fibers, which is a method of combing and fluffing the fibers, requires a pair of wooden paddle-shaped tools which have wire teeth in a leather backing attached to the wood (see Figure 1).¹ By placing the fibers on the wire teeth and pulling the cards against each other, the carding process is accomplished. The primary difference in wool cards and cotton cards is that on cotton cards, the wire teeth are more flexible and set much closer together than the wool cards. These hand cards, either wool or cotton ones, can still be found in attics or trunks. Cotton cards were still in use to make cotton batts for quilts as recently as World War I in the Jackson Purchase.

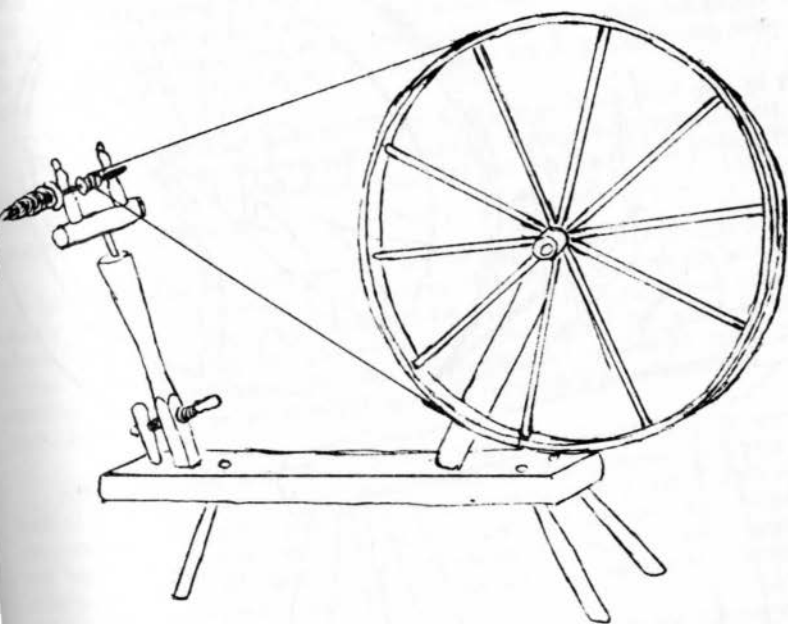
After the fibers were carded, they were ready for the spinning wheel. The two types of wheels which were used are shown in Figures

2 and 3. Figure 2 was commonly called a high wheel, walking wheel, or wool wheel. Figure 3 was known as the low wheel, treadle wheel, Saxony wheel, or flax wheel.



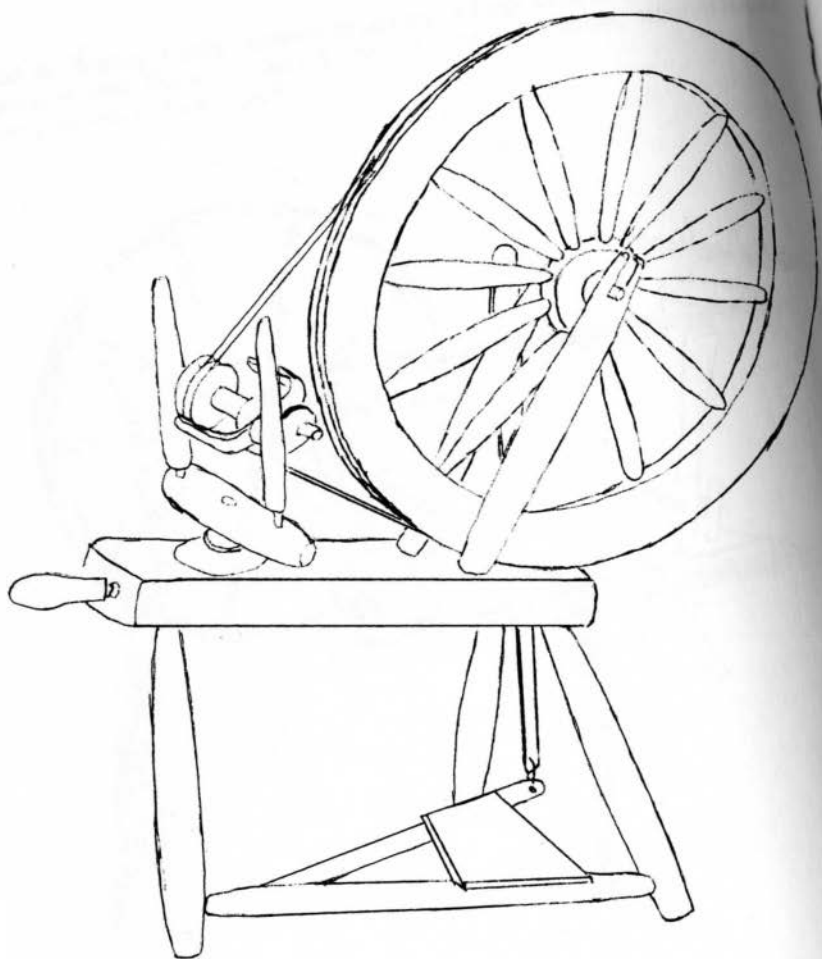
Side view

Figure 1



Sc Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$ in. = 1 ft. It.

Figure 2



Scale: 1 1/2 in

Figure 3

The walking wheel was the easier to construct and is more frequently found in the Purchase area. It was the one generally used in the spinning of wool and cotton. The large wheel on the right was used as a drive mechanism to turn the smaller spindle where the actual spinning of the yarn took place. As the yarn was spun, the spinner would move back from the wheel, and then stop and wind the yarn onto the spindle. With this walking back and forth, the spinner might walk as much as twenty miles in one day of spinning and never leave the spinning wheel.

The low wheel was used primarily for flax or linen, but any of the fibers can be spun on it. Because it required more sophisticated tools to make, this type was not generally used by the early settlers, unless they brought it with them.

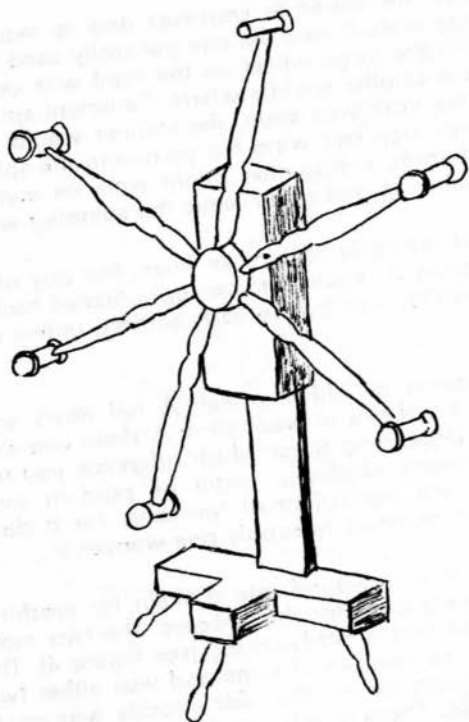
Spinning was a slow process on either wheel. A full day's work usually meant the spinning of six skeins of wool yarn. A skein was anywhere from 80 to 200 yards, depending upon which reference you use. If you were spinning for someone else, you might be paid in soap, candles, or woven fabric for your equivalent of ten cents for a day's work. Also it took seven to eight spinners to supply one weaver.

After the yarn was spun, it was wound into a skein for washing and/or dyeing. Various tools were used for this process. The two more common ones were the clock reel and a niddy-noddy (see Figure 4). The reel had a mechanism to count the number of turns and was either two or two and one-half yards in circumference. The niddy-noddy was much more portable and was hand-held. These usually made a two yard skein.

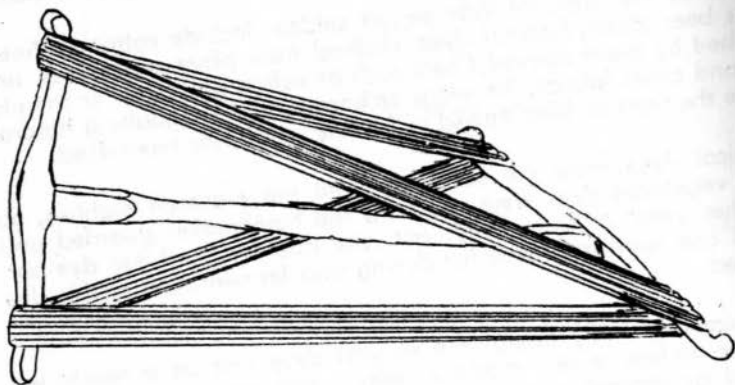
Fabrics of the pre-Civil War period seldom include cotton or linen which has been dyed. Natural dyes, derived from plant substances, are not absorbed by plant-derived fibers such as cotton and linen. In the old coverlets and other fabrics, the warp or base thread is usually a natural color while the weft or filler thread is the one which has been dyed.

Chemical dyes were not available until the eighteen eighties, so natural or vegetable dyes were used. As the homemaker guarded and cared for her yeast or sour-dough pot, she also watched her dye-pot. Indigo was one substance used for dyeing and fermentation of this dye was required.

Wool would readily accept the natural dyes and as a result, we still find the indigo blues, madder reds, wood bark or walnut hull browns, and goldenrod or osage yellows in yarns in the weaving of 125 years ago.



Clock reel



Niddy-noddy

Figure 4

Looms used by the early settlers in the Purchase were of two types. The more common type (Figure 5) had most of the moving, working parts suspended from the upper framework. It was basically self-contained and even had the bench built-in. Excellent examples of this type may be found at the Art Department of Murray State University or at the Market House Museum in Paducah. The less common type had the beater, marked A in the illustration, on a rocker base supported from the floor or lower part of the frame. Either loom would have occupied a minimum of twenty square feet in the room. Because of their size they were sometimes put in another building or dismantled when not in use.

Patterns or drafts for threading the looms were carefully guarded and preserved.

It (the draft) was written on a narrow slip of paper, from four inches to half a yard long according to the length of one unit of the pattern and was fastened on the front of the loom in plain sight of the weaver . . . The draft consists of lines and figures, or if the weaver could not read, figures on lines only, mystifying to the uninitiated. These may be found in many an old house tucked away in trunks and cupboards, rolled up and carefully tied with thread. When spread out they are seen to be marked with multitudinous pin pricks as one worker and another has put in a pin to keep her place in the 'drawing in'.²

Looms used by the settlers were relatively simple when compared to the ones used by the itinerant weavers of the early 19th Century. These weavers were generally "Old World" trained and used a Jacquard loom. This type of loom was relatively complex and made it possible to weave almost any kind of design or figure. Coverlets woven on a Jacquard loom are the ones where you find the weaver's name, date, and/or location woven into the design, usually on the border or corner.

Although the work of making fiber into fabric was primarily the wife's responsibility, the children were involved in the preparation of the fibers for the spinning. Also before she could marry, every girl had to have a certain number of blankets and sheets in her trousseau. It was through the tradition of mother training daughter that much of this knowledge was retained. Learning how our early settlers processed and produced fabric can only make us appreciative of our option today of walking into a store and purchasing the finished item of clothing we desire.

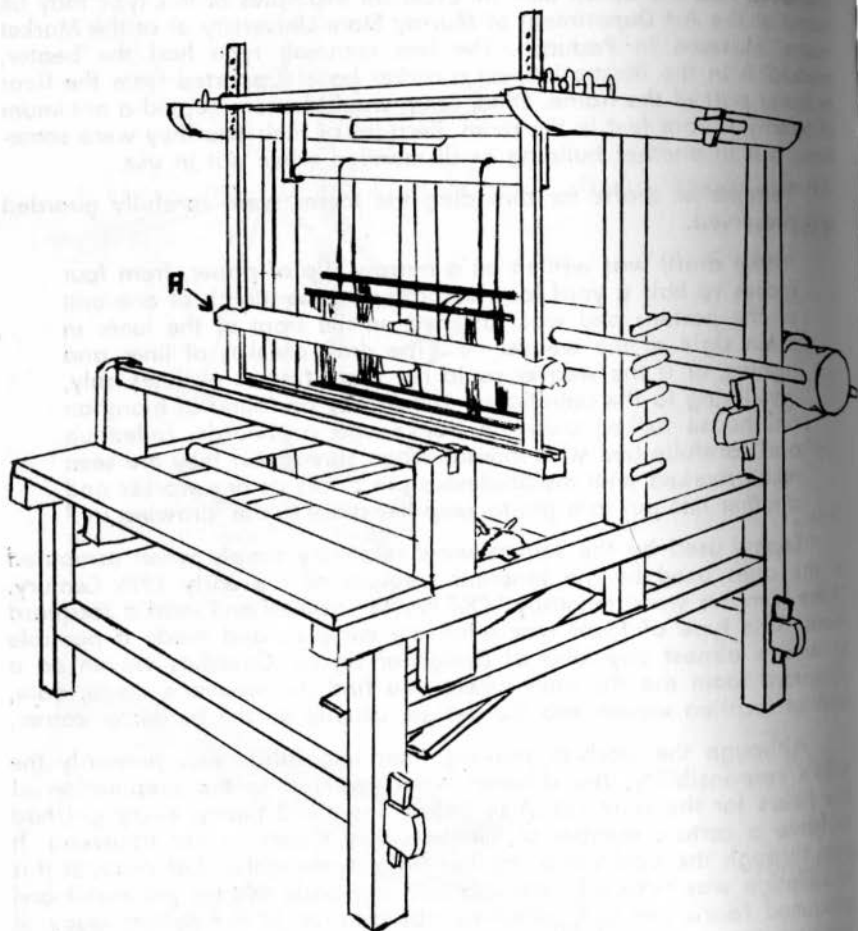


Figure 5

1. Illustrations in Figures 1-4 are reproduced with the permission of Marion Channing from her two books.
2. Frances L. Goodrich, **Mountain Homespun** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), pp. 8-9.

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